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ABSTRACT

The role of higher education institutions may be changing as the public becomes increasingly disquieted by the enormity of the adult illiteracy problem. Recognizing the need to help growing numbers of semiliterate freshmen catch up, colleges and universities have set up centers to provide basic skills programs, counseling, and other services. Community colleges are veterans in serving out-of-school adults who are not necessarily college bound. They are the second largest provider of basic skills instruction in the nation, outranked only by federal Adult Basic Education programs operated through the public schools. Experts predict that during the next decade or so responsibility for adult basic education (ABE) will shift predominantly to community colleges. Providing literacy instruction for adults is totally consonant with the mission of community colleges--to expand educational opportunity. Some colleges and universities are being drawn into basic skills provision through the federal College Work-Study Program, a component of which trains students to work as tutors in community literacy programs. Increased attention to adult literacy in higher education is also evident from basic and applied research activities developing on numerous college campuses around the country. A study has also recommended that higher education focus its efforts on teacher training to prevent illiteracy. (YLB)

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BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY: PROGRAMS • PLANNING • ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

NO. 11 APRIL 1987

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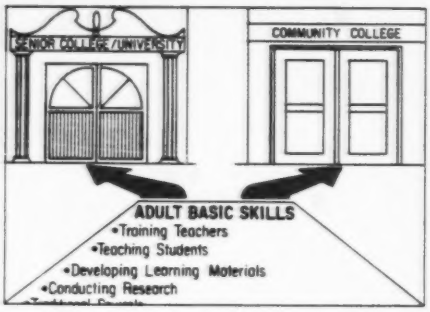
COLLEGES & LITERACY



Not long ago it was rare to hear of any link between higher education and adult literacy. Colleges and universities dealt with people at the top of the education ladder, illiteracy involved those at the bottom, and seldom the twain did meet–except in community colleges, which are a newer, different breed of post-secondary institution. Four-year colleges and universities surely did not teach basic skills because that is outside their traditional mission. But neither did they prepare literacy teachers or administrators, develop literacy materials, nor conduct research needed for a better understanding of adult literacy, all of which fall well within their mission. Adult literacy practitioners have had to limp along in a kind of nether world, without the support, strengths, or even legitimacy of a recognized profession.

The role of higher education institutions may be changing, however, as the public becomes increasingly disquieted by the enormity of the adult illiteracy problem. This article focuses on some of the ways colleges and universities are presently involved and how they could be more so, bringing to bear on this pervasive national problem their unique expertise.

Serving Their Own Students

"What's a major university doing teaching adults to read and write?" is a question often asked at the City University of New York (CUNY). Since 1984, CUNY has provided such instruction at twelve campuses to nearly 9,000 men and women in the community at large. Over the past twenty years it has given basic skills help to some 100,000 of its own students who couldn't otherwise have made it through college. With its pioneering open admissions policy and committment to making education available to economically– and academically–disenfranchised students, CUNY's programs were forerunners for similar programs now offered in colleges across the country.

While deficient basic skills are suffered disproportionately by minority groups and the poor, the problem cuts across social and geographic boundaries and has penetrated the walls of even the most "selective" higher education institutions. The declining ability of high school graduates to read, write, and handle basic math has been reported extensively in the professional literature and the popular press. That the problem is urgent in higher education was made apparent by a 1984 report, *College Responses to Low Achieving Students*, by Professors Roueche, Baker, and Roueche at the University of Texas. Based on a survey of every college and university in the U.S., the study cited some alarming statistics. Among them: Stanford University found it necessary in 1972 to set up a learning center to provide remedial programs; by 1976, 50 percent of the freshman class was getting academic help there. At UCLA, as much as 60 percent of the entering freshmen in 1982–the top 12 percent of all high school students in that state–failed the English proficiency exam.

The study noted that "it is not uncommon today to find 30-40 percent of entering freshmen reading below seventh-grade level. Each fall, colleges find dozens, sometimes hundreds, of students who...are reading below a fourth-grade level."

Recognizing the need to help growing numbers of semi-literate freshmen catch up, more and more colleges and universities have set up centers to provide basic skills programs, counseling, and other services. More than half have been established since 1970, with the greatest growth in senior colleges.

Programs are offered at high cost to the institutions. Ohio reported spending $10-12 million for this purpose in 1982; Georgia, more than $6 million in its 33 colleges and universities in 1981-82. But if the cost of helping college students catch up is high, the cost of not doing so looms ominously higher. We believe the need for remedial programs at the postsecondary level to be so great," the authors state, "that should the colleges fail to meet it adequately, their continued existence may be in doubt."

The National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities, in its recently released report, *To Secure the Blessing of Liberty*, speaks with a similar urgency. Charged with framing recommendations to guide the 400 colleges and universities in its membership into the future (the members enroll some 2.5 million students), the Commission asserts: "For the foreseeable future state colleges and universities must plan to provide remedial instruction." It recommends adopting a set of minimum skills and proficiency levels which all students should attain, and urges the institutions to make a concentrated effort to reduce the need for remedial programs by becoming more active in the preparation of high school students for college study.

(cont'd. on p. 4)

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COLLEGES & LITERACY

(cont'd. from p. 1)

Why The Problem Looms So Large

Just why so many adult Americans can't read or write to an adequate level of functioning has no simple answer. The causes are complex and interrelated–the effects of discrimination and poverty, inadequately-trained teachers, poor schooling, intergenerational transfer of illiteracy from parent to child, and changing social requirements for literacy, to name some. A discussion of each of these causes is beyond the scope of this article, but the latter needs some elaboration here.

Adult literacy cannot be thought of as a precisely-defined set of skills that remain constant over time. It was once defined as the ability to simply sign one's name. In the 1920's a 5th-grade reading level was considered the minimum needed to function adequately. During World War II this rose to 8th-grade equivalency. Today most experts say it should be 12th-grade.

> *In a major study by researcher Larry Mikulecky of Indiana University in 1980, it was found that 70 percent of the reading material found in a cross section of jobs is between 9th-grade and 12th-grade difficulty, and 15 percent is even higher. Material used in military jobs averages 10th-12th grade in level of difficulty according to the study. And 12th-grade level is needed to read and understand the average newspaper.*

In 1975 the University of Texas Adult Performance Level Study (APL), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, rejected the use of school-grade completion levels as the measure of literacy (it is not a meaningful measure) and developed instead specific competencies needed for a person to function (i.e. tasks to be performed in everyday living and working), regardless of his or her level of academic achievement. *The point was and is that literacy is not so much the ability to decode words and read textual material as it is to process the information contained therein, derive meaning from it, and apply it to specific tasks that need doing in specific contexts.* The 1986 study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress of the skills levels of 21-25 year olds stresses the same point.

The Community College Outreach

Community colleges are veterans in serving out-of-school adults who are not necesarily college bound. They are the second largest provider of basic skills instruction in the nation, outranked only by federal Adult Basic Education programs operated through the public schools. In 1985, community colleges received 21 percent (about $40 million) of the total federal and state outlay for ABE programs (with 61 percent going to school-based programs).

In five states (Iowa, North Carolina, Oregon, Wisconsin, and Washington State), community colleges constitute the exclusive system for delivering basic skills to out-of-school adults. In seven states (Alaska, Idaho, Kansas, Nebraska, Nevada, Wyoming, and New Mexico), they are the predominant source of ABE instruction, with school districts and other community groups playing a lesser role. In still other places, such as California, Florida, and Texas, the community colleges are responsible for a substantial portion of ABE. The programs of California and Florida alone serve some 1.1 million persons, or nearly 40 percent of the adults served by ABE nationwide.

Some experts predict that in the next decade or so responsibility for ABE will shift predominantly to community colleges, and indeed changes in the language of the federal ABE Act a few years ago explicity sought to encourage this. There is a cogent logic in favor of such a shift. It is widely recognized that adults find it demeaning and embarrasing,to attend schools for basic skills instruction for a number of reasons: schools are places designed for children; they bear unpleasant associations with past failure; and teachers accustomed to working with children aren't properly trained to meet the special educational and motivational needs of adults. Thus, school-based ABE programs are commonly viewed as counterproductive environments for recruiting and retaining adult students.

Providing literacy instruction for adults is totally consonant with the mission of community colleges. Their establishment after World War II, spurred by the great numbers of veterans attending college under the G.I. Bill, was for the purpose of expanding educational opportunity. They were to open the doors to members of society who had previously been closed out: lower socio-economic groups, blacks, women, working adults, and commuting students. They were to integrate general and vocational education and, most important of all, serve local community needs. Today there is a public community college located within commuting distance of every American. A total of 1,219 are threaded across the land. A characteristic of all of them is their close, organic tie to the life of the community. That tie is often reflected in frequent partnerships with other public and private groups in pursuit of a common goal.

A typical joint effort links instruction in reading, writing, and English to job training. In Worchester, Massachusetts, for example, Quinsigamond Community College, the Newton Buying Corporation (retail clothing), the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and the Metro South/West Private Industry Council are engaged in a project that will enable 50 workers, primarily Spanish-speaking, to develop English proficiency. The college is developing a special ESL job-related curriculum. It conducts classes at the company warehouse at shift change times, and is working with the union to develop a system of peer language coaches to support and encourage their fellow workers.

"The college displayed a real sensitivity in the way it went out to the employer and the union," says Sondra Stein of the Workplace Education Initiative, under whose aegis the program operates. "They really custom tailored the whole thing to meet our needs." The Initiative is funded by the Massachusetts Office of Training and Employment Policy and the State Department of Education. Its purpose is to help qualify workers for better jobs and to develop models which link basic skills groups, unions, businesses, and others.

Community colleges also are frequently affiliated with the voluntary literacy agencies, such as Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and Laubach Literacy. A typical joint arrangement is one in which college personnel are instructed by LVA in how to train tutors, who in turn strengthen the college's basic education classes by working with students there on a one-to-one basis. Together the colleges and the voluntary agencies develop strategies for local recruitment, choosing curricula, managing programs, and the like.

The historical commitment of community colleges to the education of the total community has been underscored recently by action of two of the national professional organizations that represent them:

The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, in its 1987 public policy agenda, for the first time specified literacy as a major focus of concern. It is planning special programs to help at-risk groups in the population. One aspect of that effort will be to help member colleges increase the number of adults earning high school diplomas, strengthen day care services to single parents while they are in class, and focus on the competencies needed by these students to succeed in small business.

The League for Innovation in Community Colleges, a national consortium of 19 of the largest urban-based community colleges in the U.S. and Canada, is similarly committed to the underprepared student. The League is presently assessing the needs and services for these students in their member colleges, with a focus on literacy in the workplace. Last September the League's newly-formed Business and Industry Task Force met with Senator Paul Simon of Illinois to discuss national needs in workplace literacy, out of which came a pledge by both to explore ways the League can address the issue.

Among the subjects being explored is the use of interactive video courses in English-as-a-Second-Language. Dedicated to innovation and experimentation, the League has a five-year project with 11 national computer companies to improve the application of computers to teaching and learning, including basic skills instruction. A number of League members have already developed outstanding programs using technology for basic skills instruction, notably Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte (NC), Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, and Miami-Dade Community College.

College Work-Study

Some colleges and universities are being drawn into basic skills provision through the federal College Work-Study Program, under which financially-needy students are paid to work part-time in order to remain in school. In the literacy component of the Program, students are trained to work as tutors and as supporting staff in community literacy programs. In some cases they receive college credit for their work.

This project, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, started in 1983-84 as a pilot with 18 institutions taking part–ranging from community colleges to major universities. Funds totaling $340,000 enabled more than 250 students to tutor and help in other ways with the literacy work of schools, community organizations, literacy councils, and other such groups. Now in its third year, the project has nearly tripled in size to include 61 institutions. The level of funding has nearly doubled. Eighty percent of all Work-Study funding comes from the federal government; 20 percent from the institutions themselves. The colleges like Work-Study because it is a source of inexpensive labor for them, benefiting both the students and the institutions.

An independent evaluation of the Work-Study basic skills program after one year of operation concluded that it has great potential and is cost effective. It noted that more than 8,000 adults had benefited from

the program and, further, that it provided an enriching work experience for the student tutors. The evaluation underscored that if the program is to be continued and expanded to additional sites, federal funds would have to be made available independently of regular Work-Study monies so as not to draw students away from regular campus jobs on which the colleges have come to depend. At this writing, however, the entire effort may be in peril. In the education budget submitted to the Congress in January, the President requested zero funds and a rescission of all campus-based student aid programs for the coming year. If the proposal is accepted by Congress, College Work-Study is among the programs that will be wiped out.

Promising Research Trends

Penn State Literacy Logo

That attention to adult literacy in higher education is growing is also evident from basic and applied research activities developing on numerous college campuses around the country–at Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie-Mellon, Indiana University, Columbia University, North Carolina State, the University of South Carolina, Penn State, and elsewhere. Space permits only a few citations here but they are illustrative examples:

Harvard. At the request in 1986 of Harvard president Derek Bok and John Shattuck, Vice President for Government, Community, & Public Affairs, the Harvard Reading Laboratory initiated a study of local literacy activities in Cambridge and Boston. Its purpose was to learn what they are doing, what in their programs need improvement, and what Harvard might do to help.

"The issue of adult literacy is a very important one in the greater Boston area and in the state," says John Shattuck. "Governor Dukakis has made it a major focus of his new administration. Along with other programs, he's announced plans to set up a Citizens Literacy Corps. He has asked Mr. Bok to serve as its co-chair and we'll be working with the state to structure it. The study was a first step toward informing ourselves and others about adult literacy centers in and around Boston." [Note: The Citizens Literacy Corps is one element in a new Massachusetts State Board of Education policy which seeks to develop a comprehensive system within five years for delivery of adult basic skills services so that everyone in the Commonwealth who wants to become literate can do so.]

Harvard also is planning to offer a program in which practicing adult literacy teachers and interested undergraduate and graduate students will be trained to teach adult basic skills at zero to high-school levels. In addition, follow-up meetings are continuing with personnel of the literacy centers that were included in the study. "We need them to share with us what they know. As researchers, we need the feedback," says BCEL advisor Jeanne Chall, who is director of the Harvard Reading Laboratory. "We are visualizing a center for research on adult literacy in the School of Education and have recommended that it be established," Dr. Chall added.

University of Pennsylvania. The Literacy Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania was established in 1983. It is an interdisciplinary effort to study problems of literacy at every age level and across cultures. It aims to contribute to the professional and academic communities and to aid public policy development through basic and applied research.

One major research project (supported by the Philadelphia National Bank), is working to design and place in use learning assessment tools that are appropriate to the diverse personal needs and goals of individuals attending literacy programs. "The emphasis is less on reading and writing as a set of technical skills," says Dr. Susan Lytle, project director, "than on literacy as a set of cultural and social practices that involve the use of print in different ways in different communities."

The Center is also sponsoring a working conference, *Research From The Inside Out*, on May 9th. It will bring together practitioners and researchers from around the country to map out new directions in current research and explore areas for collaboration. Moreover, Sheldon Hackney, president of the University, has a strong personal interest in adult literacy. A forum hosted by him last fall assembled 200 representatives from business, higher education, and literacy organizations to link these groups so they can work together on the city's literacy problems.

Penn State University. The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at Penn State was established in 1985. It is concerned exclusively with the literacy problems of adults. Most of its work centers on the advocacy and use of computers and other instructional technology for teaching literacy. To this end, it engages in research and development, trains teachers, and provides technical assistance to literacy programs.

Among its current projects is one to develop computer courseware for teaching word recognition skills to low-literate adults, an effort undertaken for the State Department of Education. For the National Institute of Corrections, modules are being developed to train literate prison inmates to tutor non-literate inmates in the basic skills. (See p.3, News In Brief, for other activities.)

Boston University. In what is probably the first activity of its kind anywhere, Boston University recently called together more than 35 deans from two- and four-year public and private institutions to discuss the role of higher education in support of adult literacy in Massachusetts. One goal was to identify what could be done by the various types of institutions to better serve different populations. Teacher training and certification was also an issue of top concern. The full agenda before the group will be taken up in future meetings.

Training Teachers To Teach

The California legislature recently commissioned a study by James Johnson of the Far West Laboratory to examine the existing system of literacy provision in the state and to determine an appropriate role for postsecondary institutions. Among the study's recommendations is that higher education focus its efforts on teacher training, not only teachers of adult education but elementary school teachers as well. "A critical dimension in dealing with the issue is prevention, treating the problem at its source–and 'too many elementary school teachers simply don't know how to teach reading,' " the report said.

As a profession, adult basic education has for so long been a marginal enterprise that most colleges and universities have offered very little by way of professional teacher preparation. At the undergraduate level, where most teachers start, there is almost a total absence of courses in adult basic education. At the graduate level, some 125 institutions now offer programs in the general field of adult and continuing education, about half including some basic education component. (Some of these, at San Francisco State University, University of Rhode Island, University of Arkansas, and University of Wisconsin, for example, are reported to use outstandingly innovative approaches.) But it is still rare to find fully developed graduate programs leading to a master's degree or more.

One barrier is that there is too little demand to justify offering such programs. In general, there isn't much incentive for students to major in the field because of its lack of status, the lack of competitive salaries, and the absence of career ladders and an institutional constituency.

Is A New Field Taking Root?

In the aggregate, these developments do seem to foreshadow a new and lasting place for adult literacy in higher education. But are they pace-setting moves that other institutions will follow and that in the end will professionalize the field and build for it a respected niche in the educational structure? The answers are only now in the making, but many experts believe so.

"We see a growing trend," says Jeanne Chall. "More and more scholars and reading researchers are becoming involved in adult literacy. There is more good serious work coming out, such as the NAEP report. One of the important things about this is that, as in all the sciences, it sets a pattern for the young people who look to the older workers in the field." Arlene Fingeret of North Carolina State University observes: "I'm beginning to see people in higher education act as if they do have a role. Mostly in the past you would hear 'Yes, it's an important issue but it's got nothing to do with us.' Now they're acting as though it does." Boston University's Ruth Nickse adds: "There's a trend toward much more involvement in many areas–teacher training, technical assistance to local programs through networks, basic research into how adults learn to read, applied research and materials development, and the use of technology."

BCEL advisor David Harman of Columbia University cautions, however, that "there have always been conferences and odds and ends of research. The research is usually mapped out by funding agencies and usually involves the regional research labs rather than universities. It's all fragmented and uncoordinated. What we lack is a solid research base, but to do something at the university level requires funds and these are not perceptibly increasing. Some foundations have announced big grants, but in the main they're for service and that puts researchers in conflict with those who want the money for running programs. Yet their programs would be more effective if we all knew more about how to make them that way." On this, there is consensus through the field. ■